Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 42(1), pp 17–38 February 2011.
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Shan virtual insurgency and the spectatorship of the nation

Amporn Jirattikorn

The Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) is today one of Burma's largest remaining ethnic opposition armies. This paper investigates ethnic politics of the SSA-S and their strategic use of media. It argues that Shan insurgency today has moved into a new phase characterised by its intense involvement with mass media. The paper examines, on the production side, the Shan insurgency's media products and its networking with the Thai press. On the reception side, it explores how the images of ethnic insurgency are consumed by Shan audiences living in exile, analysing how long-distance Shan nationalism is generated through the spectatorship of these 'militarised' images.

The Shan have been engaged in a civil war within Burma[1] for decades. Today the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) is the only remaining resistance group of the Shan ethnic insurgencies and the largest remaining ethnic opposition army in Burma. This paper investigates the shift in the politics of Shan armed struggle beginning in 1999 after the SSA-S relocated to Loi Tailang near the Thai–Burma border. It argues that the Shan insurgency today has moved into a new phase in which a military war is hardly taking place. The Shan insurgency today has become rather a symbolic or 'virtual' insurgency whose strategies are deployed via cultural and political realms and whose fighting is mediated by mediascapes.[2]

This paper seeks to identify the new phase of Shan armed struggle in two areas. First, this new phase is characterised by the intense use of mass media and the important role of transnational exchange. The SSA-S, while its physical stronghold is in the Burmese territory, has its legs stretched across borders. On the one hand, they have sought public relations with Thai media in various forms, such as print, television

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1 I use 'Burma' instead of 'Myanmar' for the reason that the name change was made without consultation with the populace. Throughout the paper, the term 'Burman' will be used to refer to the dominant ethnic group while 'Burmese' is to citizens of the nation.

2 My usage of 'mediascapes' builds upon Arjun Appadurai's mediascape, by which he refers to the creation of images through electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 27–47.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(TV) as well as popular music, to draw upon their moral support. On the other hand, the group is reaching out to win the hearts and minds of its migrant population. This has in effect transformed the Shan armed struggle from a local movement confined to fighting with the Burmese army to a larger movement with a Thai and Shan migrant audience. Second, I argue that mass migration of Shans into northern Thailand over the past decade has resulted in a demographic shift in the Shan population. This development in turn influences the politics of the SSA-S. We therefore begin to see the SSA-S attempts to reach out to the Shan migrant population in Thailand through the use of mass media. This demographic shift, which has spurred mass migration of the Shan into Chiang Mai, has simultaneously facilitated the interaction of distinct groups of migrants with each other.

One body of literature on South Asian insurgencies such as the Khalistan insurgency and the Sri Lankan Tamil insurgency shows that insurgent movements have benefited and gained much support from their co-ethnic transnational diaspora.[3] Some of the diaspora groups have also set up Internet websites as a means to support the insurgency movements 'back home'.[4] At the same time, scholars working on transnational diasporas argue for the double relationship or 'dual loyalty' that migrants, exiles and refugees have to places.[5] Dual loyalty is manifested in their connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with the homeland. Diasporic populations frequently occupy no singular cultural space but are enmeshed in circuits of social economic and cultural ties, encompassing both the mother country and the country of settlement.[6] While the involvement of the Shan insurgency in mass media and its attempt to draw support from its migrant population seem to operate in a similar fashion with the insurgencies mentioned above, the question remains: how is the call to be part of the struggle taken up by members of the Shan migrant audience? It is also important to question the notion of 'diaspora'. The study of transnational migration, because it focuses on transnational processes and activities, is often caught up in presenting a given group as homogeneous, ignoring heterogeneity within the group. I argue, on the one hand, for the need to speak of the Shan not as a group but as a number of different competing Shan ethnic identities, continuously reconstructed and reinvented. On the other hand, we need to take into account the different social conditions among migrant populations that provide attachment to the idea of nation in some, while discouraging such a view in others.

3 See Christine Fair, 'Diaspora involvement in insurgencies: Insights from the Khalistan and Tamil Eelam movements', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 11, 1 (2005): 125–56; Sarah Wayland, 'Ethnonationalist networks and transnational opportunities: The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora', *Review of International Studies*, 30, 3 (2004): 405–26.

4 Mark Whitaker, 'Tamilnet.com: Some reflections on popular anthropology, nationalism, and the Internet', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 77, 3 (2004): 469–98.

5 See, for example, Linda Basch, Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton-Blanc, *Nation unbound: Transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments and deterritorialized nation-states* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1999); Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton Blanc, 'From immigrant to transmigrant: Theorizing transnational migration', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68, 1 (1995): 48–63; Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo and Patricia Landolt, 'The study of transnationalism: Pitfalls and promise of an emergent research field', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22, 2 (1999): 217–37.

6 Portes, 'Study of transnationalism', pp. 217–27; see also Roger Rouse, 'Mexican migration and the social space of post-modernism', *Diaspora*, 1, 1 (1991): 8–23.

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In suggesting that we pay attention to diversity within a migrant population, I introduce two groups of Shans in Chiang Mai — the diaspora and the new arrivals. Shan 'diaspora' defines those who will continue to dwell in a host nation but for whom the mythical homeland is more important than the host nation or the contemporary homeland.[7] They differ from the recent migrant population in that they were forced to leave home because of political conflict rather than economic need. They are comprised of current or former militants, exile activists and other intellectuals, and are obliged to maintain links with homeland politics. The new arrivals or 'economic migrants' are those who left home during the last 10 or 15 years, driven by economic hardships and internal conflicts in Burma. They work in low-paying jobs that involve everything from construction work, agricultural farms to service sectors. While Shans present in northern Thailand may be divided into a number of different categories, my aim in introducing the 'diaspora' and 'economic migrants' is not to suggest that we take the boundaries of these categories as fixed or unchanging but to provide a working framework to investigate how the difference in the notions of 'diaspora' and 'economic migrant' contributes to the differences in the meanings both ascribe to national and ethnic identity. I attempt to show in the following pages that the Shan 'diaspora' are obliged to maintain links with homeland politics and they work in tandem with the Shan ethnic insurgency in the struggle for recognition and political autonomy.

Literature on mass media and nationalism agrees that mass media play an important role in the nation-building project. The Burmese government has been known for militarising its centrally controlled mass media and communications. Media in Burma have long served as an instrument to transmit the orders and symbols of the state.[8] In trying to understand Shan media as an integral part of Shan nationalism, the question I raise here is what kind of media are we dealing with? Shan insurgent media, I would argue, straddle two different concepts of 'national' and 'indigenous'. Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart discuss the role played by indigenous media in cultural and political struggles such as preserving indigenous cultures, and advocating for cultural rights as well as mobilising in advocacy for self-determination.[9] Lisa Brooten argues that the indigenous media of Burma reflect the needs of its indigenous groups to protect themselves against the assimilationist politics of a brutal military regime. The indigenous media in Brooten's study are those evolved from several sources such as the women's movement, ethnic minority movements and

7 My definition of diaspora whose consciousness is defined by continuing relationship with homeland draws upon William Safran, 'Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return', *Diaspora*, 1, 1 (1991): 83–93; Gabriel Sheffer, *Modern diasporas in international politics* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986); Michael Kearney, 'The local and the global: The anthropology of globalization and transnationalism', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1995): 547–66.

8 Lisa Brooten, 'Global communications, local conceptions: Human rights and the politics of communication among the Burmese opposition-in-exile' (Ph.D. diss., Ohio University, 2003), pp. 31–2, 94–100. See also Christina Fink, *Living silence* (London: Zed Books, 2001), pp. 34, 90.

9 Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart, 'Introduction: Indigeneity and indigenous media on the global state', in *Global indigenous media: Cultures, poetics, and politics*, ed. Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 1–35; see also Fay Ginsberg, 'Indigenous media: Faustian contract or global village?', *Cultural Anthropology*, 6, 1 (1991): 92–112.

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environmental groups, typically operated along Thai–Burma borders.[10] Put in this framework, media and music videos produced by the SSA-A can be seen as indigenous media aiming to mobilise advocacy for the movement toward political autonomy. But can the media produced by an insurgency be simultaneously 'indigenous' and 'national'? The fact that it attempts to speak to a Shan population both within and outside Burma, advocating an independent Shan nation, I would argue, makes it 'national'. The Shan insurgency's attempt to reach out to the migrant population and its efforts at public relations beyond its population exemplify ways in which insurgencies operate their organisation to resemble a nation-state. In other words, they form a 'shadow state' with military and political wings as well as public relations and media departments.

In her study of Shan insurgency print media, particularly two magazines produced by the Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) and the SSA-S from 1984 to the present, Jane Ferguson argues that Shan insurgent media work towards the end goal of an independent Shan nation. A key concern in Ferguson's study is Shan written script, by use of which the insurgency print media went to its greatest lengths in transmitting Shan literacy to the Shan population at large. Ferguson argues that Shan print media are a means by which Shan people can relate back to a historical narrative which includes the Shan kingdom while at the same time envisioning a future cosmopolitical order which includes a full-fledged Shan nation. In Ferguson's view, a cosmopolitan order lies in the fact that the Shan have their own print media and are able to be literate in their own language — two of the necessary components of sovereignty.[11] While I am in agreement with Ferguson that Shan 'insurgent media', despite the lack of means of media production, have long served as an integral part of Shan nationalism, my concern is to move beyond print media to examine Shan insurgent media in the age of 'digital reproduction'. The question we need to push forward is how the new media technology, which allows borrowing, piracy and mixture of elements from various sources, could have greater political and cultural impact on insurgency independence politics. Furthermore, what is often left out in the studies of media and nationalism is audience reception. I attempt to move a step further by looking not only at how the insurgency transmits 'insurgent morality' in order to win the hearts and minds of the migrant population, but also how the Shan audience responds to the call to be part of the struggle.

In the following, I discuss a new phase of Shan armed struggle in three important aspects. First, I provide a chronology of the Shan insurgency movement in relation to Shan nationalism and Burmese history over the five decades after independence. Second, I look at the transnational characteristic of the movement both in terms of its relationship with the Thai media and its attempt to gain support from the Shan migrant community. Third, I explore how the Shan migrant audience responds to and engages in the call to be part of the struggle. My last section questions the notion

10 Lisa Brooten, 'Media as our mirror: Indigenous media of Burma (Myanmar)', in Wilson and Stewart, *Global indigenous media*, pp. 111–27.

11 Jane Ferguson, 'Revolutionary scripts: Shan insurgent media practice at the Thai–Burma border', in *Political regimes and the media in Asia*, ed. Krishna Sen and Terence Lee (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 106–21; Jane Ferguson, 'Rocking in Shanland: Histories and popular culture jams at the Thai–Burma borders' (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 2008), pp. 135–65.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of 'dual loyalty' that diaspora scholars make claim to while suggesting a difference in the notions of 'diaspora' and 'migrant', which in turn contributes to a different engagement in their support of the movement. In this study, I employ ethnography to examine the shift in the politics of Shan armed struggle. Ethnographical data used in this paper were collected in the course of my dissertation research during 2005–06. My methodology integrates textual analysis, participant observation in the process of media production and consumption. My participant observation took place in a variety of setting as I chatted, ate, drank, worked and participated in festivities with my informants. My fieldwork also included two short trips in February and July 2006 to the Shan State Army's headquarters where I interviewed Shan soldiers and participated in festivities with them. My approach resembles Louisa Schein's 'genre-blurring', a demonstration that engaging cultural texts and media products and representations, their production, distribution, and social effects are an inalienable part of the field.[12]

Shan nationalism and the Shan insurgency movement

Discussion and analysis about the history of Burma after independence, the military rule and present political tensions have been well documented.[13] Therefore I will not attempt to discuss all of these here. However, I shall briefly examine and differentiate the key concerns in Shan nationalism and Burmese nationalism. During the struggle for independence in the 1940s, Burmese nationalism meant struggle to break free from a foreign coloniser in which all ethnic groups joined hands to achieve this goal. Since independence, however, Burmese nationalism has been conflated with 'Burman' nationalism. As Ashley South, among others, has argued, Burmese nationalism movements have generally been dominated by Burman personnel, who have often sought to perpetuate – and impose – a notion of Burmese-ness, derived from the Burman historical tradition.[14] Scholars refer to this process as 'cultural corporatism' or 'Burmanisation' whereby the military government is 'Burmanising' culture and history, and suppressing diverse social identities.[15] In response to the process of Burmanisation, the idea of Shan 'nation' and Shan nationalism came into being.

Historically, the area that we call 'Shan State'[16] today existed as several principalities ruled by hereditary chiefs called '*sawbwa*' ('Lord of Heaven'). The Shan fell

12 Louisa Schein, *Minority rules: The Miao and the feminine in China's cultural politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 25–30.

13 See Robert Taylor, *The state in Myanmar* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009); Mary Callahan, *Making enemies: War and state building in Burma* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004); Robert Rotberg, *Burma: Prospects for a democratic future* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1998); Narayanan Ganesan and Kyaw Yin Hlaing, *Myanmar: State, society and ethnicity* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2007); Robert Taylor, *Burma political economy under military rule* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

14 Ashley South, *Ethnic politics in Burma: State of conflict* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 28.

15 Mikael Gravers calls this process 'cultural corporatism' whereas Gustaff Houtman coins the term 'Myanmafication' (or Burmanisation). See Mikael Gravers, 'The Karen: Making of a nation', in *Asian forms of the nation*, ed. Stein Tonnesson and Hans Antlov (London: Curzon Press, 1996), p. 240; Gustaff Houtman, *Mental culture in Burmese crisis politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1999), p. 32.

16 Burma is divided into seven states and seven divisions. While 'divisions' are predominantly Burman, 'states' are home to particular ethnic minorities. The seven states are Chin, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), Karenni (Kayah), Mon, Arakan (Rakhine) and Shan State. I use 'Shan State' here to refer to the present

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under Burmese rule during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. After 1888 they transferred their alliance to the British. Under British rule, the Shan States remained relatively autonomous as a protectorate while 'Burma proper' was incorporated into British India under direct rule. Josef Silverstein has argued that the ways in which the British governed the Shan States by allowing greater autonomy helped to separate the interests of the Shan chiefs from those of the rest of Burma, and helped perpetuate the historic separatism between the Shan States and Burma proper.[17] While it can be argued that the British practice of divide-and-rule had infused the idea of separate ethnic identity,[18] it was only recently that the idea of a 'Shan' nation has come fully to form. The idea of Shan nationhood, I would argue, came into being after the Second World War when Shan chiefs agreed to join the Union of Burma but retained the right of secession after a period of 10 years if they so wished.[19] The very idea and consciousness of a nation, on the one hand, was mobilised during the time when the Shan joined hands with the Burmese in the struggle for independence. On the other hand, the idea was rooted in a 'primordial' claim based on ethnic and cultural traits as well as in a political claim on an existing, well-defined autonomous territory given to the Shan States during British rule.

Shan ethno-nationalists have been taking up arms to demand political autonomy for many decades. While the Shan struggle for independence is one of the most long-standing ethno-nationalist movements in the history of Burma, its history can be summed up in two terms: factionalism and the narcotic trade. While it is not my concern to cover five decades of fighting in detail, the linear narrative of events in relation to its resources, external forces and internal factionalism provides a background for my discussion on the shift in the politics of Shan armed struggle.

In 1958, the first small and underground resistance group, Num Suk Han (Young Brave Warriors) led by Sao Noi, was launched.[20] While scholars often argue that the Panglong Agreement signed in 1947 was the first and foremost reason that brought Shan armed struggle into existence, the situation was further complicated by the entry into northern Shan State of the Kuomintang Army (KMT) in 1949 as they fled from the People's Liberation Army of China.[21] Rangoon sent troops into the Shan State, extending direct central government control into many of Shan

geographical area of Shan State. However, the terms 'Shan States' is also used when discussing several states ruled by Shan chiefs which existed before and during the British annexation, when Shan States remained autonomous as a protectorate.

17 Josef Silverstein, 'Politics in the Shan State: The question of secession from the Union of Burma', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 18, 1 (1958): 43–57.

18 Robert Taylor, 'Perceptions of ethnicity in the politics of Burma', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 10, 1 (1982): 7–22.

19 Silverstein, *Politics*, pp. 43–57.

20 Various spellings. Martin Smith refers to this group as Noom Suik Harn. See Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1999), p. 190. The Shan words used in this paper have been transcribed according to Shan orthography provided in Sao Tern Moeng, *A Shan–English dictionary* (Kensington: Dunwoody Press, 1995). However, I do not attempt to indicate tone markers in my transcription. I have also made changes in the transcriptions of some vowels, for example, instead of *ai* (as in *air*), I use *ae*. My intention is to give non-Shan-speaking readers a general sense of the way the word is pronounced.

21 Bertil Lintner, *Burma in revolt: Opium and insurgency since 1948* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1994), pp. 185–9; Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp. 129, 152–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

principalities for the first time. While the KMT invasion had brought opium business into this area, the presence of the Burmese Army provoked separatist intentions in Shan State.[22]

The next decade, after the first Shan armed group was launched, saw the emergence of various armed groups claiming to represent Shan nationalism. In 1960, the Shan State Independence Army (SSIA) was set up by Shan students who had broken away from Num Suk Han. In 1961, the Shan National United Front (SNUF) was set up by Colonel Gon Jerng, former Num Suk Han commander, and Sao Sang Suk, former SSIA leader. In the same year, there emerged the Shan National Army (SNA) which operated in eastern Shan State with money from opium sold to Laos. In 1964, the Shan State Army (SSA) was launched by the merging of SSIA, SNUF and the Kokang Revolutionary Army.[23] Since then, the SSA has remained the main politically motivated insurgent group in Shan State, even though the movement has suffered from a lack of arms and ammunition.[24]

Meanwhile, after General Ne Win seized power in 1962, the Rangoon government set up counter-insurgency operations in the form of independent militia units called Ka Kwe Ye (literally 'defence affairs') in remote areas which could not be defended by regular troops. Under this counter-insurgency, any guerrilla unit which chose to become a Ka Kwe Ye on the government side would be allowed to retain its arms and local authority. In Shan State, a Chinese-Shan named Chang Chi-fu, later known as Khun Sa, was the most powerful of the local militia commanders. His unit was well equipped with modern weapons bought with opium profits on the black arms market in Thailand.[25]

Along with the emergence of independent militia units, the same period saw the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) as a new strong force adding to all the conflicts already in existence in Shan State. The KMT, backed by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) due to the American fear of communism and with support from Thailand, retreated from Shan State to set up a base on Thai soil. In *State of Strife*, Martin Smith sums up the period after General Ne Win seized power as a time of 'internationalisation and intensification' of the conflicts when China supported the CPB in the north-east and Thailand aided the KMT and other ethnic insurgents in what were considered 'buffer states'.[26]

Within the Shan nationalist groups themselves, the 1970s saw the three armed forces playing different roles in the politics of the Shan struggle. The SSA, a seemingly true Shan nationalist force, yet with little money and without help from the United States, turned to the CPB for unlimited Chinese guns. The SURA, founded by

22 Lintner, *Burma in revolt*, pp. 185–9. See also Bertil Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's struggle for democracy* (London and Bangkok: White Lotus, 1990), p. 31.

23 In discussing about the new phase of contemporary Shan armed struggle, I do not assume that the transnational characteristics of the Shan insurgency are new. In fact, the first convention of the Shan State Army took place in Chiang Mai in 1964. What is new in today's Shan armed struggle is based on the factor of demographic shift in Shan population and the advent of new media technology.

24 Lintner, *Burma in revolt*, p. 182. See also Michael Fredholm, *Burma: Ethnicity and insurgency* (Westport: Praeger, 1993), p. 159.

25 Lintner, *Burma in revolt*, p. 207.

26 Martin Smith, *State of strife: The dynamics of ethnic conflict in Burma* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Colonel Gon Jerng who broke with the SSA in 1968, established its headquarters at Piang Luang, a small market town on the Thai border. The SURA allied with General Li Mi's third army of the KMT for protection.[27] Khun Sa was imprisoned for a few years during the early 1970s. Released in 1974, he set up the Shan United Army (SUA) which was to become a powerful new armed force in the next decade. It was around this time that Chang Chi-fu assumed the Shan name of 'Khun Sa'.[28] Khun Sa's SUA and the third army of the KMT, both of which were located on Thai soil, became rivals in the opium business.

By the 1980s, however, the Shan armed struggle had shifted into a new direction. Khun Sa's booming town at Ban Hin Taek, Chiang Rai province, began to cause the Thai government some anxiety. In 1982, it was attacked before Khun Sa retreated across the border to Burma. One year later, he set up a new camp in Homong, opposite Mae Hong Son province in northwestern Thailand. The SURA came under pressure from Khun Sa's SUA which by then had overrun all the areas surrounding SURA's headquarters. In 1985, the SURA agreed to merge their forces with the SUA. The joint force was renamed the Mong Tai Army (MTA) in 1987. Since then, it remained entirely under the control of Khun Sa. The MTA was not only numerically strong but also heavily armed with all sorts of modern arms, financed by the narcotic trade.[29] By combining the SURA and some of the SSA into the MTA, Khun Sa was able to project a pan-Shan image and foster the hope that one day he might bring independence to the Shan people.[30]

The strongest Shan insurgent group in the history of the Shan resistance came to an end in January 1996 when Khun Sa shocked his army by surrendering his arms and men to the Burmese government. Khun Sa's 20,000-man MTA split into two groups. The Shan State National Army (SSNA), led by Gan Yawd, left the MTA a few months before Khun Sa surrendered and immediately signed a ceasefire agreement with Rangoon. The SSA-S, led by Colonel Yawd Serk, once a lieutenant of Khun Sa, declared its intention to continue fighting against the central government. There was also another ceasefire group, the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N), operating in northern Shan State, which signed a ceasefire agreement in 1989. This paper focuses mainly on the SSA-S, as it is the only Shan armed group which continued to fight against the central government.

The Shan State Army: Relocating the insurgency

Morten Pedersen writes that today only three significant groups remain fighting with the central government: the Karen National Union (KNU); the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP); the SSA-S. The SSA-S is the largest with an estimated 3,000–4,000 soldiers, the KUN has around 2,000, and the KNPP, around 500–1,000.

27 Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, p. 334.
28 Lintner, *Burma in revolt*, p. 282.
29 Ibid., pp. 259–64; Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, pp. 339–44.
30 Smith notes that Khun Sa is a real master of political brinksmanship, playing the politics of identity by presenting himself as Shan, and at the same time allying himself with the Thai monarchy. His base was hung with portraits of the King and Queen of Thailand. Smith writes that Khun Sa suggested to him that if the Tailand Revolutionary Council (TRC) could not succeed in achieving military secession from Burma, the 'eight million Shan people' should consider joining their ethnic 'brothers' in Thailand. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency*, p. 343.

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While the SSA-S has a permanent base along the border on Burmese territory, the KNU and KNPP operate as guerrilla armies from small or mobile bases along remote parts of the Thai border.[31]

The SSA-S is in fact a splinter of Khunsa's MTA. When Khun Sa surrendered in 1996, Yawd Serk formed a new group and adopted the name 'Shan State Army-South'.[32] Failed in negotiations with the Rangoon government for a ceasefire agreement, the newly formed SSA-S then vowed to continue fighting. In 1999, after operating as small mobile units for a few years, the SSA-S relocated to near the Thai border, establishing its stronghold on top of Loi Tailang. Although this mountain is in Burmese territory, the SSA-S built an unpaved road to connect it with Thailand.

This move was a geopolitical one. Yawd Serk provided an account in his diary, stating that there were three important factors which led him to settle close to the Thai border.[33] First, he anticipated that his insurgent group would increasingly have to make contact with the international community. Therefore, he required a location that was easily accessible to the outside world. Second, over the past few years, there were many Shan orphans and displaced villagers under the Burmese Army's forced relocation programme, for whom the SSA attempted to help find shelter. Third, the Shan insurgency was often wrongly accused of being a drugs army. In fact, the SSA-S aims to move to a new phase of ethnic insurgency that does not rely on drugs as a source of financial support. In addition, Thailand is seen by the group as a gateway to international media and public awareness. Beside these three official reasons, proximity to the Thai border also facilitates the SSA-S in collecting taxes from goods crossing the border from insurgent-controlled areas. As Yawd Serk stated in an interview with a Thai magazine, when asked how his army gets financial support: 'we survive on taxes levied on the cross-border trade in contraband from Thailand to Burma and vice-versa'.[34]

The relocation of the group was followed by the creation of the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), a civilian organisation charged with overseeing non-military and political operations on behalf of the SSA-S. The RCSS has been in charge of all non-military activities, which include: (1) setting up a refugee camp for Shan orphans and displaced villagers; (2) producing an SSA-S newsletter and website (http://www.taifreedom.com); (3) managing public relations and maintaining contact with the international community.[35] This means that from now on international politics will take a leading role in the Shan struggle.

In this spirit, close association with Thai society is considered important in order to facilitate the SSA's goal to fight the Burmese army. Thailand is now waging war against drugs trafficking and the foremost perceived threat to Thailand's national

31 Morten Pedersen, 'Burma's ethnic minorities: Charting their own way to peace', *Critical Asian Studies*, 40, 1 (2008): 45–66.

32 The 'South' was added to avoid confusion with the 'Shan State Army-North', the group that had agreed to a ceasefire.

33 The diary was later published during the 10th anniversary of non-submission to the Burmese rule in January 2006. See Yawd Serk, *Kuk khob sip pee aum wang keung* [Ten years anniversary of non-submission] (No publication details, 2006).

34 Anonymous, 'Interview with Yawd Serk', *Salween Post*, 20 (2005), pp. 7–12.

35 Yawd Serk, *Ten years*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

security today is no longer opium but the highly addictive methamphetamine pills. It is believed that all of the '*ya ba*' (literally 'crazy drug') tablets smuggled into Thailand are produced in areas controlled by the United Wa State Army (UWSA), minority insurgents in a ceasefire agreement with the Rangoon government. SSA's new anti-drugs policy has thus turned them to fight with the UWSA instead of waging war with Burmese troops. The offensives that occurred in 2002 and 2005 along the border area appeared to be Shan insurgents fighting with the UWSA, whereas the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) troops were not directly involved in the battle.[36] Over the past few years, in a bid for legitimacy and international support, the SSA-S has been assaulting the heroin factories and intercepting the mule convoys run by the UWSA backed by Rangoon's military regime. From time to time, the SSA-S stages 'drugs bonfires', destroying contraband they claim to have confiscated from the UWSA in front of the Thai and international press.

Brokers of the insurgency, transnational insurgents

In arguing that members of Shan 'diaspora' work in tandem with the insurgency in soliciting support from the migrants, in the following, I provide ethnographic detail of individuals who play an important role in SSA-S's cultural and political policies. Sai Han, Sai Mon, Sai Lek and Sa Ka Ha had joined various armed groups since 1975. During 1975–84 they were part of the SURA and became 'cultural units' of the MTA when the SURA merged with Khun Sa's MTA in 1985. With financial support from the army, they formed the band Jerng Laew (Freedom Way). Composing songs in the Shan language, their task was to entertain soldiers and feed those Shan guerillas a dose of nationalist sentiment with their songs. During the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, they released nine cassette albums dealing with the plight of Shan people in Burma, the lives of Shan soldiers who endured hardships for revolutionary ideals, and condemning the oppressive Burmese regime.[37]

In 1996 when Khun Sa surrendered to the Burmese military regime, they dispersed. It was only in 1999 that they reconnected again when the SSA-S relocated to Loi Tailang, near the Thai border. Yet, this time, their paths have crossed under the context of a new insurgency, a transnational one. Sai Lek, who remained with the army since 1996, has been in charge of training new recruits for the SSA-S and is based in the headquarters at Loi Tailang most of the time. Sai Han, after Khun Sa's surrender, had settled down in Chiang Mai only to rejoin the army again after the SSA-S moved to Loi Tailang. From his base in Chiang Mai, he has been assigned a role in public relations along with Sai Mon, whose task is to open lines of communication with the Thai. As times have changed, the new generation of armed struggle changed as well, and the insurgents suddenly appeared in the city.

In a different fashion, while his fellows were still attached to the insurgency, Sa Ka Ha settled down in Chiang Mai and decided to become independent. In seeking

36 Michael Black and Roland Fields, 'On patrol with the Shan State Army', *The Irrawaddy*, 14, 7 (2006): 12–3 (http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id = 5947, last accessed 8 Oct. 2008).

37 Their albums were produced in small amounts; 1,000 copies of each album were sold both in Thailand and Burma. Although Shan retailers inside Burma had to sell the albums secretly due to the political content of the songs, this secret business also allowed them to copy the albums freely. Thus their songs were disseminated widely through illicit channels.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

his own way to establish Shan media in exile, he and his senior comrade, Khur-yen, once a spokesman and political advisor of Khun Sa, set up a news agency under the same name that they had both used to work under Khun Sa's sponsorship, the Shan Herald Agency for News (S.H.A.N.). No longer a propaganda agency whose task was supporting and cheerleading for its military leader, they sought international funding and aimed to be independent. This is, however, not a clear-cut business, as the national objectives of individual often coincide with group ideology. While Sa Ka Ha intended to distance himself from any political or armed group, he has always been an active supporter of the SSA-S in terms of both giving advice to SSA-S leaders and reporting news about the Shan State Army's activities in the S.H.A.N. newsletter. The S.H.A.N., which has its own website (http://www.shanland.org) and circulates news (in Shan and English) concerning Shan issues via e-mail, has become the site where all official SSA statements, memoranda and proclamations are circulated. They have also been invited to serve as members of the advisory board for the SSA-S while working for the Shan news agency in Chiang Mai. In effect, they have become the chief architects of SSA-S publicity.

The above are individuals who share the same background — former professional soldiers. However, the support that the SSA-S has received from individual Shans living in Thailand does not come only from a group of former militants. There are lawyers, teachers, monks and even families of *sawbwas* ('Shan princes') involved. They tend to be educated and carry with them past nationalist links. In one extreme case, I met a couple who settled down in Chiang Mai about 10 years ago. The husband, Sang, is a son of the last *sawbwa* of Mong Nai, and the wife, Nang Khur, was an accountant at Taungyi University. The first year that the SSA-S relocated to Loi Tailang, they were invited to join the Shan New Year celebration and since then have become strong supporters of the SSA-S. Nang Khur has been in charge of a military training curriculum for SSA-S soldiers. She comes up to Loi Tailang for every training season and stays there for three months to provide skills training for new recruits.[38] Yawd Serk is particularly proud of this military training, which he says concentrates on all-round instruction, including intellectual studies and ethics.[39] He comments: 'the SPDC has no morals. They do not teach their soldiers skills; they cannot develop the country'.[40] While the wife is in charge of education and training, the husband, Sang, is on the SSA-S political advisory board. Due to his command of English, he is also in charge of foreign affairs whenever the SSA-S needs to contact the international press.

On a network level, when I visited Loi Tailang in 2006, I met a group of Shan men based in Bangkok who come up to the SSA-S headquarters once or twice a year. They brought with them money that they had collected from fundraising among Shan migrants working in Bangkok. Although they could not raise a very large sum, as Shan migrants cannot afford to donate much money, what I found intriguing were the T-shirts they had produced and brought to Loi Tailang. The T-shirts feature images of marching soldiers and the SSA-S flag, as well as Yawd Serk's portrait

38 As of 2009, Nang Khur had resigned from the SSA-S advisory board. The reason, given by her, was her health.

39 Black and Fields, *On patrol*, pp. 12–13.

40 Alice Coster, 'Shan State Army: Fight for peace', *The Nation*, 20 Feb. 2007.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and written message: 'Today we have a leader. Come join us to fight for Shan independence.'[41]

Although each individual nominally operates independently of the other, their activities inevitably overlap and are coordinated under the same ideology. They comprise a political network that works across state borders. What drives these individuals and their agency perhaps lies in their past and present experiences, which interact to make up their 'diasporic' identity. While their past experiences – be it as university students, professional soldiers, teachers, or families of Shan princes who lost power during the post-independent era – politicised them and perhaps drove them into exile, the wellbeing of the present they manage to acquire from their 'symbolic capital' is the engine of their support for the insurgency.

These are people whom I call members of the Shan 'diaspora'. They are those who will continue to dwell in a host nation but for whom the social formation of diaspora and mythical homeland are more important than either the host nation or the contemporary homeland.[42] In a strict sense, William Safran defines diaspora as those who: (1) are dispersed from an original 'centre' to at least two 'peripheral' places; (2) maintain a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland; (3) experience alienation in their host country; (4) desire for eventual return to the ancestral home; (5) are committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland; and (6) those whose consciousness and solidarity as a group are defined by this continuing relationship with the homeland.[43] As stated, I argue for the need to speak of the Shan not as a homogeneous group but a number of competing Shan ethnic identities. My usage of 'diaspora' here is to provide a working definition of a different group of Shans who differ from the recent migrant population. They were forced to leave home because of political conflict rather than economic need. They had been settled in Thailand for quite some time before the influx of large numbers of Shan migrants in recent decades. Some managed to acquire Thai citizenship, married Thais and others run their own businesses. By definition, they already possess many factors requisite for mobilisation: shared identity, common grievances, and symbolic resources. They left home for good, yet they nurture themselves with the desire to create a sovereign state, a nation-state-yet-to-be.

On the institutional level, in 1996 Shans in Chiang Mai and Bangkok founded a group in exile called the Shan Democratic Union (SDU). The SDU key members consist of Shan elites, military veterans and Shan intellectuals. The SDU claims to function as the foreign ministry of the Shan 'exile nation' with the formal support and approval of the SSA-S.[44] The SDU often releases statements concerning the issues facing Shan people on behalf of the joint committee of the SDU and SSA-S.

At grassroots level, there exists the Jum Khon Num Tai (Shan Youth Group) comprised of about 100 Shan migrants living and working in Chiang Mai. Sai Mon,

41 The text is written in Thai scripts. The original text reads: '*Ma ruam kan pai ku chat khong rao khuen. Nai wan ni rao mee phunam*'.

42 For various definitions of 'diaspora', see Kearney, 'The local', pp. 547–66; Sheffer, *Modern diasporas*; James Clifford, 'Diaspora', *Cultural Anthropology*, 9, 3 (1994): 302–38.

43 Safran, 'Diasporas', pp. 83–93.

44 Shan Herald Agency for News, 'Intro to SDU' (http://www.shanland.org/oldversion/index-3132.htm, last accessed on 28 Nov. 2010).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in charge of SSA-S public relations, is a group leader. Not only does the group organise cultural and political activities based in Chiang Mai, its members also occasionally travel to Loi Tailang to perform in concerts to entertain Shan soldiers. The group has occasionally mobilised Shan youths in Chiang Mai for military training at the SSA-S headquarters. In 2005, I met Sai La, a young Shan man working in Chiang Mai who was a member of Jum Khon Num Tai. He told me that he had just come back from a month-long training programme at Loi Tailang. The programme was a military-cum-information training organised especially for Shan migrants in Chiang Mai, which the SSA-S hopes will impart knowledge about the plight of Shan people in Burma to their Shan fellows. Sai La went with another 10 Shan migrants from Chiang Mai and was asked to find new recruits for the next training programme. Although participating in the training does not mean that he becomes part of the SSA-S, he is committed to disseminate information about the Shan struggle to fellow Shans.

Insurgencies drawing upon support from diasporic populations, in fact, are hardly new. Palestinian movements have done so for decades, as has the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), which has long relied on Kurds in Germany for funding.[45] The Khalistan (referring to the Sikhs) insurgency and the Sri Lankan Tamil insurgency have used mass media to communicate with and gain support from their co-ethnic transnational diaspora.[46] As long as a group can use its diaspora for support, its insurgency campaign can be sustained. In most of the cases, co-ethnic transnational diaspora are dispersed among several states and often provide support from a distance.[47] The Shan, however, is a peculiar case in terms of a 'proximate' diaspora which provides insight into how a state border is actually being transcended in order to sustain an insurgency. The agents of the Shan insurgency operate on different levels and with varying degrees of involvement: some can be called 'transnational insurgents'[48] who directly associate with the insurgency but live and organise in external sanctuaries; others define 'transnational ethnic networks'[49] as they take advantage of transnational openings to extend and lend support to the insurgency in the homeland.

This, however, does not mean that Thailand turns a blind eye to those activities or is unable to control its border. The Thai tolerate the insurgency on the border as long as the SSA-S keeps its hands clean from drugs production and trafficking. But what makes the picture above more complicated is that along with the increasing porosity of the borders and the attempt to construct a new phase of Shan insurgency, a massive flow of Shans coming from Burma to perform migrant labour in recent decades has come to change Shan demography. These new migrants have within the past decade come to constitute one-sixth of the total Chiang Mai population,

45 Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau and David Brannan, *Trends in outside support for insurgent movements* (Pittsburgh: RAND, 2001), pp. 41–2.

46 As for the Khalistan movement, it is now seen as a smaller-scale movement. The group seeks an independent Sikh homeland through donations from foreign Sikh supporters. See Fair, 'Diaspora', pp. 125–56; Whitaker, 'Tamilnet.com', pp. 469–98.

47 Fair, 'Diaspora', pp. 125–56. See also, Wayland, 'Ethnonationalist', pp. 405–26.

48 Paul Staniland, 'Defeating transnational insurgencies: The best offense is a good fence', *The Washington Quarterly*, 29, 1 (2006): 21–40.

49 Wayland, 'Ethnonationalist', pp. 405–26.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

or around 150,000 in this city with a population of about one million. These migrants provide low-paying services which involve everything from construction work, serving as housemaids, food vendors, and sellers in the markets. What has emerged from this new influx is the presence of various groups of Shan migrants at the same point of time. While Shans in northern Thailand can be divided into many different categories, the migrants and the diaspora are the two groups in question here. Unlike the diasporic Shan, these migrants are young, struggling to survive and driven by economic need. Most of the money they earn is sent to family members back home. This demographic change in turn influences insurgency politics in the homeland. Just only a few years earlier, the SSA-S was still looking for new recruits from Shan State, Burma. As the 1999 SSA-S annual meeting report stated, one of the SSA-S's plans was to seek new recruits among young Shan men inside Burma.[50] In 2007, the SSA-S commander has inevitably come to terms with the fact that perhaps half of the young Shan population now lives in Thailand. Recently, he stated that he wants 'his people [now living in Thailand] to come back to Burma to help him fight for independence'.[51]

As the next section details, the Shan insurgency today has strived to cross the border in response to the shift in its population. This is a peculiar cross-border exchange, in which the insurgency and the Shan diaspora work in tandem, on the one hand, to draw support from the Thai, and on the other to win the hearts and minds of the migrant population.

SSA-S's deployment of media: Voices of the struggle

SSA-S public relations with the Thai media cover a wide range of forms from print media to pop music to film. Of the many Shan sympathisers, Yuenyong Ophakul ('Ad' Carabao) provides an extreme version of support for the movement. 'Ad' is the lead singer of the Thai folk-rock band Carabao. With his role as social critic, the SSA-S found a perfect entity to support the SSA-S movement. In May 2001, Yawd Serk invited Ad Carabao to visit Loi Tailang and was inspired to write music about the Shan after his visit. Ad started researching into the history of the Shans' fight. In 2002 He found that the Shan and the Thai in fact share the same origins. A year later, he came up with an album called *Mai tong rong hai* (Don't cry), devoted to the Shan struggle for independence. Songs on this album include '*Mai tong rong hai*' ('Don't cry'), '*Rat Shan ban rao*' ('Shan state, our home'), '*Trap wan thi pen Thai*' ('Until we'll be free') and '*Kid banchi*' ('Settle the score'), for example. Ad uses Bob Marley's reggae rhythms with his own lyrics to justify the struggle because he himself believes that the Shan have been wrongfully treated by the Burmese regime.

> I promised Yawd Serk that I would compose songs to encourage them. I know many Shan personally and I sympathise with them. They have told me how Burmese soldiers have raped and abused their women and forcibly taken the men to work as laborers. Their freedom has been seized … I wrote these songs in the hope that the Shan can

50 Yawd Serk, *Ten years*.
51 Coster, 'Shan State Army'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> unite and gather the strength to fight for their nation. It is the struggle of some folks close to us, of our brothers. I need to help them with my songs.[52]

Following the album, Ad published a book with the same title about the SSA-S's fight for self-determination based on his interview with Yawd Serk.[53] His picture taken with Yawd Serk at Loi Tailang has become a symbol of Thai support for the Shan. Ad permitted the Shan Youth Group in Chiang Mai to print his image with Yawd Serk on a T-shirt. The T-shirt says '*Bang Rajan Tai Yai*', a reference to the Thai movie *Bang Rajan* (2000) which portrays the story of villagers who fought against Burmese invaders during the war that caused the fall of the Ayuthaya Kingdom in 1767. The Thai audience, proud of their ancestors who gave up their lives to save the motherland, reacted enthusiastically to a movie which they saw as representing a historical 'truth'. And for many Shans, '*Bang Rajan Tai Yai*' invokes the saying in the same way with the Thai, 'better a dead free man than a live Burmese slave'.

The SSA-S also invited Thai TV producer Noppon Komarachoon to visit Loi Tailang for the Shan National Day celebration in 2001.[54] Noppon's success with *Pai Kep Phan Din … Thi Sin Chat* (Fight for the Promised Land), a TV series based on the story of the Karen struggle for independence which came out after the God's Army's storming of Rachaburi hospital in early 2000, attracted the Shan insurgency. They hoped that Noppon could produce a new TV series based on the struggle of a Yawd Serk-like character. The project, however, did not make it to the TV screen due to some changes in the channel's policy.

After the involvement of pop singers and a TV producer in the Shan cause, next came a movie. *Phrangchomphoo* (Saving Private Tootsie, 2002) tells the story of six lady-boys who find themselves trapped in the middle of an armed conflict on the Thai–Burmese border and fall under the protection of a leader of the Shan struggle for independence, played by Ad Carabao. The movie portrays Ad Carabao as a Yawd Serk-like character. A few of the songs in the soundtrack were written by Ad Carabao. The soundtrack also includes a Shan song, '*Ler hue lod lai pen kan jai*' ('It is my duty to fight'), sung by one of the soldiers from Loi Tailang.

Thai print media have also written about the struggles of the SSA-S. Yawd Serk has often appeared in Thai newspapers and weekly magazine articles. The book, *Tai rop Phama* (Shan fight the Burmese), which came out in 2006,[55] outlines the background history of Shan State, the lives of the people under Burmese military rule, the SSA-S, and an interview with Yawd Serk. Nipatporn Pengkaew, co-author of the book, says this book was written to promote better understanding and sympathy for long-suffering minorities of Burma. Just as in the experience of Ad Carabao, after visiting Loi Tailand several times, Nipatporn became an active supporter of the SSA movement. She has published several articles in Thai magazines as well as on

52 Wandee Suntivutimetee, 'An interview with Ad Carabao', *The Irrawaddy*, 10, 7 (2002): 20–1 (http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=2709, last accessed on 10 Feb. 2009).

53 Yuenyong Opakul. '*Mai tong rong hai*' ['Don't cry'] (Bangkok: Mingmit, 2002).

54 William Barnes, 'Burmese bandit a Bangkok folk hero', *South China Morning Post*, 27 May 2001 (http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/200105/msg00101.html, last accessed on 14 Nov. 2008).

55 Nipatporn Pengkaew and Naunkaew Burapawat, *Tai rop Phama* [Shan fight the Burmese] (Bangkok: Openbooks, 2006).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

websites about the plight of Shan people, and how they have suffered under Burmese troops.[56]

Over the past few years, Loi Tailang has become a popular destination for Thai media people, academics and entertainers. As proof of its anti-drugs policy, the SSA invites Thai journalists to visit their camps to write stories about the new phase of the Shan struggle movement which no longer relies on drugs to finance its army. Beside the main media channels which include print, pop music and film, Loi Tailang also holds celebrations and military gatherings as often as four to five times a year. The celebrations are organised according to significant dates on the Shan calendar such as Shan Resistance Day, Shan National Day, Shan New Year as well as a special event that I attended in 2006 on the 10th anniversary of the refusal to accept Khun Sa's surrender. Occasionally, Loi Tailang also organises celebrations according to significant dates on the Thai calendar. In July 2006, when the entire country of Thailand celebrated the 60th year anniversary of the Thai king's accession to the throne, the SSA organised a large-scale celebration at their headquarters. Thai newspapers published the story, stating that even the Shan State Army located on Burmese soil worships the Thai king and considers him to be the only remaining Shan prince.[57]

Various media may have actively participated in this movement for their own reasons. Drawing upon the support of select groups within the Thai media, the SSA-S has been able to present its struggle to a wider audience. What the Thai media have offered to the domestic audience is a picture of a hero who is in fact the Thais' 'forgotten brother'. The message can be read as stating that the Shan and the Thai share the same origin. While the Shan and Thai are believed to be ethnic cousins with a similar language and culture, the Burmese are traditionally portrayed as old enemies who are still blamed in Thai history books for destroying the Ayuthaya Kingdom. The perception of the Burmese as Thailand's worst enemy is deeply rooted in the Thai psyche. It is therefore easy for them to take the same side in confronting the Burmese.

It would be a mistake, however, to view these networks as constructed by the SSA-S alone. Networks, of course, need to be created, and members of the Shan diaspora in Chiang Mai and Bangkok have played an important role in bringing the Shan insurgency into close contact with the Thai media. This is a site of busy traffic and linkages bridged by both Thai sympathisers and the Shan disapora. It was Sai Mon, a former Jerng Laew member, and now a public relations official for the SSA-S, who made initial contact with Ad Carabao. It was a Thai woman, a girlfriend of Sai Han, a former Jerng Laew member and now an SSA-S lieutenant, who invited Nipatporn, a Thai writer, to visit Loi Tailang to write a book about the Shan struggle. It was a Thai man married to a Shan woman who helped raise funds for the SSA-S from his base in Bangkok and who once in a while comes over to Loi Tailang to give donation money to Yawd Serk.

56 During 2004–07, Nipatporn has published several articles in Thai magazines; 'Raw tawan chai shan' ['Yearning for the sunshine'], *National Geographic Society* (Thai version), 6, 64 (2006): 68–79, 'Rao cha ku chat daui watthanatham' ['We will fight with our culture'], *Sarakadee*, 23, 267 (2007): 110–16, for example. These articles are later compiled in a book by Nipatporn Pengkaew and Naunkaew Burapawat, *Kon tawan chai Shan* [Before the sun reaches the Shan] (Bangkok: Openbooks, 2007).

57 Nipatporn Pengkaew, '60 pee nai laung bon Doi Tai Lang' ['60 years anniversary of Thai King's succession to the throne at Loi Tailang'], *Krungthep Thurakit*, 16 June 2006.

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The transnational aspect of the Shan insurgency introduces actors who are not permanently embedded in the locality of the struggle. Sai Mon who, on the one hand, mobilises Shan youths in Chiang Mai to support the movement and, on the other, builds network with the Thai media, is an excellent example of how individuals can operate within several opportunity structures at once. These networks reap the benefit of transnational openings and the porosity of the border. Not only do they mobilise financial, diplomatic and social capital in the service of an insurgency in the homeland, they find ways to draw support from their host country. The insurgency and its diaspora are intimately tied to one another.

In this regard, it is worth considering whether or not the public relations mobilised by the SSA-S and their transnational ethnic networks have made any impact on the Thai readership. On a pragmatic level, we can speculate that the Thai will never be like many radical Islamists who view Iraq as a battlefield against the United States and have travelled to the country to join the fight.[58] On the moral level, I have heard many Shan migrants express painfully how ordinary Thais cannot distinguish them from ethnic Burman Burmese and refer them as '*pen khon phama*' ('Burmese people') or sometimes '*ai phuak phama*' ('the damn Burmese'), without being sensitive about the differences between the Burman Burmese and the Shan Burmese. While the representations of Shan struggle remain positive, the penetration of alien 'others' threatens a mythical national identity and local Thais feel anything but kinship to the poor and displaced Shans struggling to survive within the country's underground migrant economy. Ironically, on the flipside of the coin, the positive representation of the Shan in Thai media has given rise to a new-found sense of pride among Shan migrants. My Shan migrant informants often say that they are proud that Ad Carabao supports the Shan and they wish that there were more people like him. They buy his album, wear T-shirts bearing his image, and sing 'Don't cry! Shan' in a melody echoing Bob Marley's 'No woman, no cry'. Of all the ironies, the images and ideas that are produced for Thai readership with intent to draw support from them for the Shan has instead come to generate a sense of ethnic pride among the Shan migrants themselves, the other side of the target.

Spectatorship of the struggle

Let us now turn to insurgent media production. In her study on Shan insurgency print media, Ferguson argues that Shan print media form a basis for a Shan 'imagined community'. Shan insurgency print media, on the one hand, articulate the movement's opposition to the Burmese military authorities. On the other, through the use of Shan written language, they build and maintain solidarity in their national project.[59] My study departs from Ferguson's research, for the medium which I seek to analyse is video compact discs (VCDs), which, over the past decade, have become the dominant Shan medium. VCDs, unlike 'print capitalism', offer a different kind of mediation that utilises moving images along with verbal communication. They, therefore, do not require literacy for their consumption. This medium is suitable for the diverse population of Shan in Thailand; some are illiterate and others read

58 Staniland, 'Defeating', pp. 21–40.
59 Ferguson, 'Revolutionary', pp. 106–21; Ferguson, 'Rocking', pp. 135–65.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and write Burmese but speak Shan in everyday life. On the production side, VCDs offer a cheap and accessible new communication technology which allows for the compilation and mixing of forms and genres. Over the past few years, with the advent of VDCs as a new domestic movie-making technology, there have been several VCDs produced by members of the SSA-S and others associated with the insurgency. Below I present some examples of VCDs produced under the name of the SSA-S as well as a joint project between SSA-S soldiers and their transnational insurgent counterparts.

The first such VCD was produced by the group called the 'Young Turks' whose leader is again Sai Han. Sai Han, like many transnational insurgents, wears many hats. Besides being a public relations person for the SSA-S and a leader of a music band, he runs 'Tiger Studio' in Chiang Mai where the album was recorded. The band members consist of seven Shan youths living in Chiang Mai. The album *Poon Phon Lae Khon Noom* (Young Shans and their duties, 2003) is a collection of 13 songs sung in the Shan language, except for one song recorded in Thai. While the first song celebrates Aung San Suu Kyi's struggle, the rest talk about the Shan struggle for independence and the hardships of being Shan soldiers. There are songs such as 'The Shan fight today', 'Our Shan motherland' and 'I am going to war'. While the lyrics are original, the music is overtly influenced by the style of Thai folk-rock singer Ad Carabao. The nationalist lyrics of the entire album seem to send out a call for young Shan men and women to participate in national emancipation. Consider, for example, 'Young Shans and their duties'. This song calls for young Shan men and women to maintain their obligation to the Shan homeland. Along with strong nationalist lyrics, the visual component on the VCD shows images of SSA-S fighters, its military training, footages of war as well as images of rice fields and the beautiful countryside in Shan State. Note that images of war scenes in the VCD are taken from existing war movies such as a Hollywood's *Hamburger hill* (1987) and a Thai movie — *Bang Rajan* (2000), mixed with original clips taken within the headquarters of the SSA-S.

The second VCD, *Wan Luk Phuen* (Revolutionary day, 2004), is produced by a band called Loi Tailang. The band members consist of seven Shan soldiers and two female singers who are family members of SSA-S soldiers. It was recorded at Loi Tailang studio, which is run by Sai Lao who in 2000 came down to Chiang Mai with a small team of Shan soldiers to acquire skills in the operation of a video camera and basic video editing. This VCD is a collection of 13 songs, all of which are sung in the Shan language except for one sung in Burmese. The lyrics are a mixture of love songs and nationalist ballads. While the love songs sung by female singers give moral support to Shan soldiers on the front, nationalist songs talk about fighting, war, and call for Shans to join hands to fight for the revolutionary day. The visual images portrayed in this VCD are similar to the first one mentioned above, made up of images of SSA-S fighters, military marches and life at the SSA-S headquarters.

The third VCD, *Lued Tam Peun* (Writing History with Blood, 2006), is made by an unknown group. It is in fact a reproduction of legendary songs by the late Sai Mu, a lead singer of the band Jerng Laew who died in 1995. The song lyrics on this album talk about the plight of Shan people under Burmese rule, life as a Shan insurgent, and calls for Shans to unite together in the struggle. While the visual images are of poor quality, they are original, presumably taken by one of the SSA-S soldiers. Interestingly,

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there is a staged scene portraying a Shan women being abused by a group of Burmese soldiers. She is later rescued by Shan soldiers.

The last and interesting example is a VCD portraying a special event: when the SSNA, a ceasefire group led by Colonel Sai Yi, abolished his camp in Burma and brought his 1,000 men to join the SSA-S. The reasons that turned them to fight with the SPDC stemmed from two factors. First, the detention of Khun Htoon Oo and other leaders of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) in February 2005 for an extreme and unreasonable length of time — 79 to 106 years. Second, despite the ceasefire agreement which grants the group the right to remain armed, and to enjoy special autonomy including business concessions, in early 2005 the SSNA was forced to disarm under the pretext of 'Exchanging Arms for Peace'.[60] Deciding to throw away the ceasefire agreement, the SSNA merged their forces with the SSA-S. The addition of 1,000 SSNA soldiers in 2005 has made the SSA-S the strongest ethnic force remaining in combat with the Rangoon government.

This VCD features the activities of the SSNA from the journey begun at their camp in northern Shan State until they joined hands with the SSA at Loi Tailang. In the beginning, it shows scenes of the camp being demolished: a bonfire consumes all vehicles and buildings. This is followed by footage of the insurgents' journey through the jungle. The middle of the VCD shows the soldiers trying to cross the Salween River, and being attacked by a small group of Burmese army soldiers. They manage to cross the river, arrive at Loi Tailang, and join with Yawd Serk of the SSA-S. Actually, the SSNA filmed all the above activities for their own records. When the group arrived at Loi Tailang, a technician who worked in the recording studio saw the footage and went on to edit them by adding some Shan songs as a soundtrack. Most of the songs included were political songs written and sung by Sai Mu, the late member of Jerng Laew. After adding songs and captions, they made copies and circulated them among SSA members. It was only later, when the VCD was given to one of the Shan Youth Group's members in Chiang Mai, that it was copied to sell in the market. As it is common, retailers in Chiang Mai would copy freely from any original copy. The VCD was then widely circulated and bought by members of the Shan migrant community in Chiang Mai. When I visited Loi Tailang in 2006, I brought the VCD, which had just been released, with me. I showed it to a man who had been involved in the making of the original VCD. He said: 'if I had known that it would sell, I would have made it better'. Of all the ironies, it is hard to deny the power of VCD technology: not only does footage of the insurgency abandoning their camp constitute a 'movie', but at the same time, once treated as a movie it comes to be mass-produced and distributed through the same illicit channels as Hollywood films. Along these lines, VCD technology helps blur the line between media makers and media distributors.

Regarding visual representation, we can place the images in these VCDs into five categories: (1) images of sorrow and tragedy of people affected by war (images which are taken from outside sources such as Hollywood movies); (2) images of military marching and training, intended to instill in viewers a sense of solidarity, and the

60 Maung Chan, 'Discussion on contemporary situation in Shan State with Sai Wansai of SDU', http://www.peacehall.com/news/gb/english/2005/11/200511300029.shtml, last accessed on 18 Dec. 2007.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

notion of physical strength and discipline; (3) images of singers in a recording studio or performing on stage during military festivals; (4) images of military leaders, in particular a portrait of Yawd Serk; and (5) images of ritual or spectacular events such as when two Shan armed groups united together. Beside all of the images related to the military, this last category presents Shan women wearing traditional Shan costumes and the beautiful landscapes in Shan State.

From these observations, two points can be made. First, these VCDs can be seen as an effort on the part of the SSA-S and its transnational insurgents to cultivate support from the migrant audience. The messages conveyed through these visual images and lyrics can be called 'insurgent morality', for they do not only transport the spectators to 'be there' as a witness to the events, the audience are also invited to emotionally and symbolically 'join in the fighting' without physically participating in it. Video technology, as we all agree, can produce 'virtual reality' to the extent to which movie images allow one to observe ongoing life in another place. Hence, regardless of whether the real fighting is taking place or not, the audience is invited to participate in this 'virtual' national emancipation. Second, coupled with the transnational flows of objects, media and ideas, VCD technology that allows for the compilation and mixing of forms and genres as well as copying has come to facilitate a new connection between the insurgency and its migrant population — bringing them into closer contact with one another in a way that audio or print media of the former era were never able to do.

Virtual insurgency: The revolution has to be televised

So, how do the Shan audience members respond to this call to be part of the struggle? In general, Shan migrant audiences can purchase these VCDs at the local store, from festival bootleggers, or from mobile vendors who travel to construction sites to sell Shan products. Even if they do not purchase them, these VCDs can be heard and seen at the Shan festivals held six to seven times a year in the city of Chiang Mai. At the fairs, the bootleggers will play Shan VCDs on a TV set with speakers all day. The VCDs produced by the SSA-S are often chosen to be played repeatedly by the music bootleggers. During the festivals, I observed that the audience, especially males, always gather and form a big crowd to watch these images together. When a Shan audience gathers in front of a TV set to watch these images in a mass public viewing, can we then assume that they are captive to the message being transmitted by the insurgency?

Most of the audience members with whom I spoke with say they like to watch these images along with hearing lyrics expressing strong nationalist sentiments, for they make them 'feel good' that at least Shans are still fighting. The VCDs were designed to inspire patriotic pride among the audience by representing masculinist, militarised notions of a 'nation'; they therefore feed into the audience's imagination that Shans still have not given up. Some Shan men say that these VCDs expose them to the 'reality' and hardships of the battlefield. When asked if exposure to the images and emotive cultural symbols makes them want to join the army, many Shans comment that they are only interested in watching; they do not want to take real action to join the army. Some add that they do not want to be killed by the enemy; others say they have responsibility for families back home. They like it that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

someone has made these videos because through these VCDs, they come to know about Shan fighting with the Burmese, and through these VCDs they can see images that they have never seen and would never have a chance to see if they were still in Burma.

Several bootleggers and retailers of Shan VCDs in Chiang Mai told me that the insurgent VCDs, especially the one about the relocation and merging of two Shan armed groups, have been some of their bestselling VCDs in the past few years. The majority of their customers are undoubtedly men. Considering this fact, we may assume that men are the target audience for the call to participate militarily in national liberation. However, I found that many young Shan girls who watched these VCDs were also incited by the patriotic feeling embedded in these VCDs. One girl told me that 'if I were a man, I would quit my job to join the army to fight with the Burmese'. Perhaps the feeling of being excluded from participating in the armed struggle paradoxically cultivates in them a sense of 'moral support' – knowing that by virtue of their gender there is no way that they could really be sent into harm's way on the battlefield – while men who are the target of these VCDs are susceptible to risking their lives if they should physically buy into this call.

Further contradictions arise in this field of audience reception. When I visited Loi Tailang twice in 2006, I had informal conversations with many low-ranking soldiers. I asked how they came to know about the SSA-S and what made them decide to quit their jobs and join the army. Many of them said that they had actually migrated to work in Thailand for years before joining the army, and while working in Thailand, they came to know about the SSA-S through media consumption, both Thai and Shan media (though they did not mention particularly the VCDs I have discussed here). Here, we have a complex situation where on the one hand, the media expose migrants to knowledge and information that would be absent in the homeland. Acquiring a new understanding of the wider world from exposure to broader currents and imagery about the struggle has made some quit their jobs to join the fight. On the other, I often heard that one of the reasons Shan men migrate to work in Thailand is precisely because their parents do not want them to be recruited as Shan soldiers. There is a Shan expression, '*jab suk*' (literally 'captive soldier') which is often used when Shan male migrants express their fears for being taken from their villages to be Shan soldiers. Many Shans say that they would rather be a migrant than a recruit. One Shan man complained that: 'In Shan State, every time we harvest, the first portion is to feed the Burmese army, the second is for the Shan army, the third is for the Wa, and only the fourth portion is for our family.' This factor has not only driven them to migrate to seek their fortune in Thailand, it also contributes to our understanding of why they do not share the sentiments that the insurgency tries to foster in them; they feel that they have enough involvement with the army.

The question remains: what is it that the Shan insurgency today is fighting for and against? The diaspora may sustain the insurgency and facilitate close contact with the migrant population, but they may not provide enough resources to definitely change the outcomes of ethnic wars. For the migrants, even though they may not want to join the army to fight, they at least 'feel good' that their fellows are fighting. They may not be interpellated by the propaganda messages, but the 'insurgent morality' and a sense of comradeship is evoked through spectatorship of the struggle.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463410000524 Published online by Cambridge University Press

On the level of rhetoric, the SSA-S claims that 'we will take back Shan State one day' and 'we will die to achieve freedom'. Yet, on the battleground, the war being fought is hardly taking place. The Shan insurgency today is fighting against drugs to bid for legitimacy and international support. It is also busy building networks with the Thai, as well as making itself visible to its migrant population. To this extent, we could perhaps describe contemporary Shan insurgency as a 'virtual' insurgency, whose strategies are employed through the cultural and political realm and whose fighting is mediated by mediascapes. In suggesting that the Shan insurgency today has become a symbolic insurgency to the point that the military war is hardly taking place, I am, however, not arguing that the struggle has ended. The insurgency has not died: it lives on in the minds of many Shan migrants. It may not be a real struggle but it is virtually being rediscovered within the spirit of many Shan migrants who today no longer deal with Burma on a day-to-day basis but come to identify with the struggle even more than before.

In taking into account that the different social conditions among migrant populations may provide attachment to the idea of nation in some, while discouraging such a view in others, it is important that we keep in mind that the boundaries of these categories are unfixed and constantly in flux. Being exposed to images and ideas that the diaspora tries to instill in them, Shan migrants may themselves 'turn diaspora' at some point. The members of the diaspora may sustain their yearning for the nation-state-yet-to-be, but in other spheres of life they are not necessarily distinct from the migrants. In the age of virtual insurgency, we may conclude that what these migrants are being recruited for is to 'join the feeling'. In this bleeding of population across the border, the revolution will have to be televised (even digitised) so that the seeds of it, now dispersed outside the land, can be rediscovered within the Shans' own hearts and minds.

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